

**Sexual Source Domain Selection: Contrasting
Forums and Academia in American English**

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have explored metaphor across languages and cultures for decades; however, few have investigated the distribution of metaphor and source domain selection across registers within one language (Lakoff, 1980). The goal of this paper is to look at data from American English and academic English and consider these differences. I will be looking specifically at American English and academic English writing about sex, a fruitful area for metaphorical analysis. Though, as will be discussed shortly, metaphor is utilized pervasively in almost all contexts, it is particularly evident when discussing the abstract or the socioculturally taboo. I will be looking at both source and target domains (though the target domains will be limited in scope, whereas source domains will not be) and contrasting them across the two registers, investigating: frequency, method of realization, and type.

A secondary goal of this paper is to reflect on the potential ramifications of metaphor (especially source domains that are pervasive) and highlight potential future areas of research. Asserting that the prevalence of a particular metaphor type does or does not influence cultural attitudes is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is my goal to begin to draw potential connections. Ultimately, this paper should contrast the two genres, considering both source and target domains for sex, and generate overarching questions about sociocultural implications for future research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Though metaphor has been widely studied throughout literature, in 1980, Lakoff and Johnson introduced the notion of metaphor as pervasive and inevitable. Instead of a creative

choice, Lakoff and Johnson promoted the notion that metaphor is instead a staple of our human conceptual systems, without which we would be unable to have effective communication. In its most simple, yet comprehensive definition, metaphor is defined as: “describing one thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). A complete metaphor traditionally consists of a “source” and a “target” domain: “The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called *source domain*, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the *target domain*” (Kövecses, 2002). Typically, the source domain will consist of more tangible content. Common source domains are: plants, food, body parts, fire, water, buildings, etc. Common target domains are: relationships, life, spirituality, arguments, etc. These persistent discrepancies in source and target domains corroborate Lakoff and Johnson’s claim that we use more tangible encounters to describe more abstract encounters and further push the idea that we would be unable to conceptualize these abstract experiences without understanding them in terms of tangible ones. Example: Our relationship grew. Here the target domain, relationships, is described using terminology usually associated with the source domain, plants. This would typically be glossed as RELATIONSHIPS ARE PLANTS.

Experientialist Disagreements

Though not the primary focus of this research, it is important to highlight some criticisms or disagreements in the discourse surrounding conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). Lakoff and Johnson’s original work not only promote CMT and the notion that we are forced to conceptualize abstract events/feelings/concepts in terms of more tangible ones, but also suggests metaphor makes “changes in our conceptual system....change what is real for us and affect(s) how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 132).

Though they specify here that “words alone do not create reality”, the authors do suggest that persistent metaphorical conceptualizations across cultures will impact how we perceive those abstract experiences. Because of these attempted connections, many other theorists still have “questions about its empirical adequacy as a theory of metaphor and its broader theoretical claims on the relations between minds, language, bodies, and culture” (Gibbs, 2009).

Sex and Metaphor

Research into CMT related to sex is not new. In his 2015 text, *Sex in Language: Euphemistic and Dysphemistic Metaphors in Internet Forums*, Eliecer Crespo-Fernández explores a variety of sex-related Internet forums to find metaphors used throughout this discourse community. The metaphors he found were numerous, but the most pervasive was the use of SEX IS A JOURNEY. When looking at this metaphor and its entailed metaphor ORGASM IS DESTINATION, Crespo-Fernández discovered that the variety of realization for JOURNEY itself was fairly limited, while the variety of realization for ORGASM was significant. There were three different metaphorical expressions for SEX IS A JOURNEY; there were 13 metaphorical expressions to describe the entailed metaphor ORGASM IS DESTINATION (Crespo-Fernández, 2015, pp. 196).

Not only does this illuminate the social prioritization of sexual climax, but it also potentially demonstrates idea that the conceptual metaphor SEX IS A JOURNEY has become a “template” that participants must adhere to. This finding is reaffirmed by a major study conducted across 27 diverse languages that focused on the language/metaphor of orgasms, citing that orgasms is “the ideal goal of sex” (Chiang & Chiang, 2016). Other major findings across languages are SEX IS REBELLION (dirty, naughty, etc.), particularly in Chinese culture (Tsang, 2009) and SEX IS UTILITARIAN (tool, machine, object, etc.), amongst young people in Malawi

(Undie, 2008). The idea of sex being rebellious/dirty or body parts being considered objects is not uncommon in American English either, but the selection of JOURNEY as source domain still occurs at a much more frequent rate.

METHODS

The goal of this project was two-fold: firstly, to document and contrast metaphors for sex between American English and academic English; secondly, to reflect and question how these findings relate to cultural attitudes about sex. For this project I took similarly to Crespo-Fernández's approach by taking data from sex-related forums (for my project, reddit.com/r/sex). This decision was made to ensure the data was as close to real speech as possible (anonymity allows for the publicization of typically "private" speech and the forum genre allows for 'unpolished' writing). I chose this subforum because, unlike Crespo-Fernández's research, the forum was not created strictly to discuss sexual encounters. Instead it covers a wide range of topics including sexual health, sexual advice, sexual relationships, sexual encounters, etc. I felt this wider range of topic would allow for a more comprehensive view of how sex is described amongst speakers of American English. The data consisted of 20 single-spaced pages of text and referenced more than diverse 30 forum posts and comments.

When looking at academic English, I took data from the "Psychology and Behavioral Sciences" database. Though many disciplines investigate sex and sexual relationships (literature, anthropology, etc.), I have chosen to focus on psychological research that observes sexual relationships and sexual identity. Future research may benefit from looking at conceptualizations of sex in other fields, as conventions and discipline-specific tenets vary greatly. Like the first data set, this data consisted of 20 single-spaced pages of data pulled from 4+ academic articles. I

attempted to pull data from the relevant sections of the articles (usually the results and/or discussion section(s) in order to ensure the data had the most reference to sex itself).

When coding the data, I coded for both source and target domains. The target domains I looked for were: the activity of sex itself, the sexual body, sexuality, sexual interests, sexual relationships, sexual issues/roadblocks, and the orgasm. For each data set I sorted each instance of metaphor into a spreadsheet with target domains in column format and source domains in rows at the top, allowing me to have the entire gloss for each occurrence. Subsequently, I sorted the metaphors into overarching categories (events, locations, etc.) and documented total occurrences of that overarching metaphor type (this will be demonstrated in the following section). It is worth noting that these were grouped by source domains, as I was much more interested in what terms were used to conceptualized sex than which aspects of sex were being conceptualized metaphorically most frequently.

DATA/RESULTS

It seems most beneficial to start with the most general contrastive data and narrow down into specific areas of interest. While much of the data will be referenced here, many of the sets are too large to comfortably fit in the body of this paper (see Appendix A and B for a larger look at the data).

Table 1

Most General Contrastive Data

AMERICAN ENGLISH DATA		ACADEMIC ENGLISH DATA	
Event	61	Event	30
Object	54	Object	33

Spatial	33	Spatial	7
Misc	46	Misc	30
Total	194	Total	100

The most obvious contrast between the two sets of data is the more significant usage of metaphor at all in American English. American English uses metaphor at almost double the rate of academic English (this is mirrored in each sub section, which highlights an almost perfect 2:1 ratio throughout each source domain type). These results were unsurprising as academic English tends to work harder to eliminate personal and cultural bias (at least in linguistic realizations) and the average American is less concerned with self-regulating their language use. However, 100 metaphors were still found throughout the academic English data. It is also worth noting that the use of metaphor throughout academic English was a bit sticky in itself, frequently functioning as a meta-commentary, theorizing how the average person might feel about sex (projecting the metaphor onto the participant rather than the author claiming the metaphor for themselves).

This stickiness, however, does not preclude us from being able to make some overarching observations about the pattern of metaphor use throughout both groups. The most notable was the frequent usage of SEX IS A JOURNEY (38 times) in the American English data, compared to zero usages in academic English. This is surprising, considering the prevalence of JOURNEY metaphors throughout English in general (further considered in the following sections).

Table 2

Sex as Object*

AMERICAN ENGLISH DATA	ACADEMIC ENGLISH DATA
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OBJECT		54	OBJECT		33
	PRIZE	1		PRIZE	0
	TOOL	1		TOOL	0
	DRUG	1		DRUG	1
	MACHINE	6		MACHINE	0
	OTHER	8		OTHER	5
	FOOD	10		FOOD	10
	POSSESSION	12		POSSESSION	16
	GIFT	15		GIFT	1

*referring to the spectrum of sexual target domains: relationships, activity, body, etc.

The data comparing the conceptualization of sex* as object is fairly representative of the data as a whole for three major reasons: firstly, it demonstrates the quantitative difference in metaphor usage; second, it demonstrates the discrepancy in metaphor variety; third, it illuminates unique and unexpected areas of overlap that warrant further inspection.

In terms of discrepancy of metaphor use and variety, we can see very clearly that American English tended to prefer a greater variety of metaphor, where academic data tended to stick to more predictable metaphors (e.g. “possession”). Two source domains used frequently in American English, but not in academic English were: MACHINE and GIFT (typically bodies/relationships were referred to as machines, whereas sexual acts were referred to as gifts) (Appendix A). The notion of a sexual act as a gift seems to be inherently culturally tied and will be discussed further.

Areas of overlap had arenas of both similarity and difference. For example, possession across both sets of data tended to refer to sexual interests/sexual identity as possession and were fairly straightforward (e.g. “his fantasies”). However, “food”, though used the same amount, had significant variety between the data sets. American English users tended to refer to things as “spicy” or refer to the body as food, whereas academic English almost explicitly used the

FOOD/NUTRITION metaphor to refer to sexual satiation across sexual relationships and sexual encounters.

Table 3

Sex as Spatial*

AMERICAN ENGLISH			ACADEMIC ENGLISH		
SPATIAL		33	SPATIAL		7
	OTHER	2		OTHER	1
	CONTAINER	3		CONTAINER	1
	DIMENSIONAL	4		DIMENSIONAL	0
	BUILDING	5		BUILDING	0
	LOCATION	5		LOCATION	1
	TERRAIN	6		TERRAIN	2
	UP/DOWN	8		UP/DOWN	2

One of the more complex pieces of data was the conceptualization of sex* as spatial. This is because it consisted of a number of diverse metaphors that could arguably be categorized in different ways. For example, SEX AS BUILDING could arguably be categorized into object, but it was exclusively used in such a way that referred to intercourse or a relationship as “building upward.” Frequently speakers of American English referred to sexual interest as going “up” or “down”, sex as having a “climax”, and sexuality as being a terrain for exploration. This subset of data boasted particularly more metaphor from American English data than from academic English data (almost five times the number). This was surprising, considering spatial metaphors appear to be much less conscious in nature (UP IS GOOD and DOWN IS BAD being much

more culturally ingrained than “SEX IS SPICY FOOD”, for example) and I anticipated they would be about equal in occurrence.

DISCUSSION

General Thoughts & Future Research

The results of the data were both surprising and unsurprising. In general it was unsurprising that American English utilized more metaphors than academic English, and it was unsurprising that American English utilized a greater variety with more domain realizations (e.g. instead of nutritional/food metaphors being realized solely as “satisfaction” or “satiation”, it was also realized as “spicy”, “delicious”, etc.). It was, however, surprising that academic English lacked the JOURNEY source domain entirely, as the domain is pervasive both within and without the English language. It is equally surprising that the largest discrepancy in domain usage lies in spatial source domains, since those domains are generally considered the most unconsciously ingrained in native speakers. Ideal areas for future research may consist of: considering the distribution of linguistic realizations of the same source domain/target domain across registers, comparing source domain usage across fields in academia, and looking at problem areas of sexual relationships to reflect on how pervasive metaphors may impact sexual happiness and sexual relationships within our culture (this will be discussed shortly).

The Gift and the Ramification

Though it is not the goal of this paper to go into an in-depth consideration of each of these metaphors and how their perpetuation may or may not impact culture, some are worth noting. For example, it was interesting that a huge portion of SEX* AS OBJECT came in the

form of SEXUAL ACT AS GIFT (it was frequently described that one could give or offer someone a sexual act). With the frequent objectification of women's bodies (and even evidenced here, the conceptualization of women's bodies as containers or the conceptualization of sexual status as a state of being/purity), the notion that sexual act or a body can be given (or taken) may lead to some interesting implications (Appendix A)(Halwani, 2010).

Journey and the Ramification

In 2016, researchers Anita Yen Chiang and Wen-yu Chiang published an article entitled: "Behold, I am Coming Soon! A Study on the Conceptualization of Sexual Orgasm in 27 Languages"; they conducted an analysis of metaphors for sex (focusing specifically on sexual orgasms) across a number of typologically diverse languages. Though interesting, I want to focus on an important detail: this research lies on the presupposed metonymy: ORGASM FOR SEX. Though the authors justify and acknowledge this presupposition, stating: "...we view orgasm as one of the most essential and representative elements in human sexual behavior" the substitution of ORGASM IS SEX is relevant and interesting (132)(Gramlich, 2018). By conducting their research on sex metaphors solely through the lens of the sexual orgasm, they constructed a conceptual metonymy (ORGASM FOR SEX) that is itself, a metaphor, simultaneously revealing the prevalence of the metaphor SEX IS A JOURNEY across cultures and languages (Kovecses, 2010). Here we are exposed to the metaphor SEX IS A JOURNEY and the entailment ORGASM IS DESTINATION.

This research is relevant for a number of reasons. First: it becomes unsurprising how frequently SEX IS A JOURNEY is used in American English. The metaphor SEX IS A

JOURNEY and varying entailments are prevalent across a number of languages and cultures, making it a staple metaphor (journey in general is a very common source domain for events, time, life, relationships, etc., so this is unsurprising). About half of the SEX IS A JOURNEY metaphors involved the entailed metaphor ORGASM IS DESTINATION. Second: it is surprising that there were no occurrences of the journey source domain in the academic writing.

JOURNEY is not an extremely common source domain, but it is important to consider what entailments and ideas this metaphor unconsciously instills into its users. Though the metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY/RELATIONSHIPS ARE JOURNEYS seem benign, they inherently entail a correspondence point (“destination”) that shifts JOURNEY from merely being a “description” to being an expectation. It shifts from being descriptive of some experiences to becoming the template by which sex (and other target domains) is considered “good” or “bad”. For example, when using the metaphor RELATIONSHIPS ARE JOURNEYS, the entailed “destination” is often marriage. Thus, when people in a long-term relationship decide not to get married, their relationship is often perceived as “alternative” or unfinished (frequently with the connotation of “failure”). So, while JOURNEY can potentially be an accurate experiential descriptor, it can also become a socioculturally-ingrained template.

Similarly, the construction of this metaphorical template can potentially impact our perception and attitudes toward sex. Sex is often perceived as JOURNEY. This likely arises from the fact that most target domains (events and activities) occurring over a span of time can be likened to a journey (and often are likened to journeys, intraculturally). However, the SEX IS JOURNEY metaphor is further reinforced by the hyponymic metaphor ORGASM IS DESTINATION. However, when researchers (and the average speaker) imply that the

JOURNEY metaphor extends into a “purposeful journey” metaphor, one must consider what it means to fulfill this “purpose”. If, then, SEX IS A PURPOSEFUL JOURNEY and PURPOSE IS DESTINATION (as is true in most journeys), and DESTINATION IS ORGASM, then an orgasm is necessary for sex to have been considered “good”, “complete”, or “successful”, for example. This leads to interesting assumptions about sexual relationships, particularly heteronormativity.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately the results of the data were helpful in illuminating patterns of source domain selection and language choice between two starkly different genres and registers in English. The data reinforced some expected results (that metaphor use would be less frequent and less linguistically varied in academic English) and showed some unexpected findings as well (the entire lack of JOURNEY domain selection in academic English). It also allowed us to navigate more complex issues, such as the relationship between source and target domain (e.g. how food was used to describe sexual fulfillment in academic English, but used to describe the activity of sex itself and/or the body in American English). Though navigating the relationship between source and target domain is complex, it is still beneficial in terms of considering why a particular metaphor is being used.

Future research could benefit from further exploration into target-source relationships and into the complex world of sociocultural effects of language. Navigating how language may or may not contribute to the construction of certain social attitudes and realities is sticky and complex, but apparently necessary. The prevalence of SEX AS JOURNEY [ORGASM AS DESTINATION] and SEX AS GIFT [BODY AS OBJECT] in American English generates

questions about the potential relationship metaphor has to sexual health and happiness issues and perception of sexual roles/attitudes amongst Americans.

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Appendix A

AMERICAN ENGLISH DATA			ACADEMIC ENGLISH DATA		
EVENT		61	EVENT		30
	DANCE	2		DANCE	3
	ATTACK	2		ATTACK	14
	GAME	3		GAME	1
	SPORTS	3		SPORTS	3
	PERFORMANCE	4		PERFORMANCE	7
	OTHER	4		OTHER	2
	WORK	5		WORK	0
	JOURNEY	38		JOURNEY	0
OBJECT		54	OBJECT		33
	PRIZE	1		PRIZE	0
	TOOL	1		TOOL	0
	DRUG	1		DRUG	1
	MACHINE	6		MACHINE	0
	OTHER	8		OTHER	5
	FOOD	10		FOOD	10
	POSSESSION	12		POSSESSION	16
	GIFT	15		GIFT	1
SPATIAL		33	SPATIAL		7
	OTHER	2		OTHER	1
	CONTAINER	3		CONTAINER	1
	DIMENSIONAL	4		DIMENSIONAL	0
	BUILDING	5		BUILDING	0
	LOCATION	5		LOCATION	1
	TERRAIN	6		TERRAIN	2
	UP/DOWN	8		UP/DOWN	2
ILLNESS		1	ILLNESS		8
EXPLOSION		1	EXPLOSION		0
TEMP		1	TEMP		0
RELIGION		2	RELIGION		0
RELIEF		4	RELIEF		0
LIVING ENTITY		5	LIVING ENTITY		9
STATE		6	STATE		1
ELECTRICITY		19	ELECTRICITY		0
DIRTY		7	DIRTY		3
		MISC: 46	IMAGE		4
			DRIVE		2
			FIRE		1
			MOVEMENT		1
			NEGOTIATE		1
					MISC: 30

Appendix B

[illegible]